

# *Rambam's Introduction*

*By Moshe son of Rabbi Maimon, the Judge,  
son of Rabbi Yosef,  
son of Rabbi Yitzchak,  
son of Rabbi Ovadiah, the Judge.  
To strengthen the hands that are slack;  
and make firm tottering knees!*

To the holy, wise, congenial, and distinguished scholar, Rabbi Yaakov al-Fayumi, son of the distinguished Rabbi Nesanel al-Fayumi, to all the communal leaders and scholars of the communities of Yemen: may Hashem, the Rock, keep and protect them. Amen. Selah.

## **PRAISING THE YEMENITE COMMUNITY**

Stems attest to the integrity of their roots, and streams bear witness to the excellence of their springs. So too, has a faithful twig sprouted out of a root of truth. A mighty river has flowed out of the wellspring of kindness in the land of Yemen to water all gardens and make blossoms flourish.<sup>1</sup> It flows leisurely to quench the thirst of every weary and thirsty wanderer in the wilderness. It satisfies the needs of all travelers on the roads and distant islands. So the message was heralded throughout Spain and beyond from one end of heaven to the other, "All who are thirsty, come for water."<sup>2</sup> Unanimously, all wayfarers reported that they had found in the land of Yemen a beautiful, luscious garden. They found a rich pasture where every shriveled creature becomes fat, a dependable grazing-

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<sup>1</sup>These sentences are meant to praise both Rabbi Yaakov Al-Fayumi and his father.

<sup>2</sup>Ref. to *Yeshayah* 55:1.

ground for their shepherds. The [Jews of Yemen] share their bread with the poor; they welcome the rich and offer them hospitality. Caravans from Sheba count on them;<sup>3</sup> they stretch out their hands to every voyager. Their homes are wide open. Everyone finds there tranquility and solace from sorrow and sighs.<sup>4</sup> They study the Torah all day and follow in the path of Rav Ashi.<sup>5</sup> They pursue justice and maintain their synagogues in good repair. They restore the principles of the Torah to their former glory. With kind words they bring back to Hashem those who have strayed, and fulfill all mitzvos meticulously. There is no breach and no defection, and no wailing in their streets.<sup>6</sup>

Blessed is Hashem for not depriving the distant isles (Yemen) of Jews who observe the Torah and keep its law, as He promised in His goodness and mercy through His servant Yeshayah. You [the Yemenite Jewish community] are the people that [Yeshayah] had in mind when he announced, "*From the end of the earth we hear singing*" (Yeshayah 24:16). May Hashem help you to fulfill the laws and precepts of the Torah, to heed justice and righteousness, to guard His mitzvos and decrees, and to uphold His covenant. Amen.

When your esteemed letter reached us in Egypt,<sup>7</sup> everyone was delighted to hear of it and enjoyed reading it. It told us that you are servants of Hashem who are standing in His Sanctuary and camping under His banner. You pursue the study of the Torah, love its laws, and wait at its doors.<sup>8</sup> May Hashem reveal its hidden treasures to you and fill your hearts with its riches. May its words be a lamp to your feet and a light for your path.

## DENIES LAVISH PRAISES

Beloved friends, you state that you heard fellow Jews in the lands of our exile – may God protect them – praise me, extol me, and rate me

<sup>3</sup>Ref. to *Iyov* 6:19.

<sup>4</sup>Ref. to *Yeshayah* 35:10.

<sup>5</sup>Rav Ashi was a leading Amora, (Talmudic authority), who together with Ravina, compiled and edited the Talmud. For almost sixty years he led the yeshivah of Masa Mechasya, near Sura in Babylonia.

<sup>6</sup>Ref. to *Tehillim* 144:14.

<sup>7</sup>In 1172, when the Rambam wrote the Iggeres Teiman, he was the chief rabbi of Cairo and spiritual leader of all Egyptian Jewry.

<sup>8</sup>Ref. to *Mishlei* 8:34.

as a towering scholar. They only said this out of love for me and spoke this way out of the goodness of their hearts and their kindness. Let me give you the facts. Do not listen to anyone else.

I am one of the humblest of scholars of Spain whose prestige was lowered in exile. Although I always study the teachings of the Torah, I did not reach the level of learning of my ancestors because evil days and hard times came upon us. We have not lived in tranquility. We were exhausted but were given no rest. I have pursued the reapers in their paths and gathered ears of grain, both the solid and the full ones, as well as the shriveled and the thin ones. Only recently have I found a home.<sup>9</sup> Were it not for the help of Hashem, I would not have attained the small amount of knowledge that I gathered and from which I continually draw.

Concerning my dear friend and student Rabbi Shlomoh Cohen who, according to your letter, praised me exceedingly, he exaggerates out of his great love for me.

May Zion and Jerusalem be rebuilt and become a flourishing garden. May Hashem return it to us in good health and happiness.

[The rhymed preface was written in Hebrew. The remainder of the Letter to Yemen was written in Arabic and translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon, in 1210. A second translation was written by Rabbi Nachum Ma'arabi (of the Maghreb)<sup>10</sup> and appeared in Basel, Switzerland, in 1629.]

Regarding the subject matter of your letter about which you asked for a response, I thought it best to reply in Arabic so that all—men, women, and children alike—should be able to read and understand it. The answer is of primary concern to your entire community.

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<sup>9</sup>Fleeing from persecution, the Rambam left his native Spain, traveled to Fez, Morocco, to Eretz Yisrael, and at last settled in Egypt.

<sup>10</sup>The Maghreb is a region in NW Africa, consisting mainly of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (compare with the Hebrew *ma'ariv*, "west"); it usually means just Morocco.

# *Words of Consolation*

## **BEMOANING THE FATE OF THE YEMENITE JEWS**

You write that the rebel leader in Yemen<sup>1</sup> forced the Jews to convert to Islam. He compelled the inhabitants of all the places under his control to abandon their religion. This is just as the Berber leader has done in the lands of the Maghreb.<sup>2</sup> This news has appalled us and has caused our entire community to tremble and shudder. And with good right, for these are indeed bad tidings, and both ears of anyone who hears about it will tingle.<sup>3</sup> Yes, our hearts are faint and our minds are confused because of these dreadful calamities, which brought forced conversion on our people in the two ends of the world, the East and the West.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish people are caught in the middle and are under attack from both sides.<sup>5</sup>

It was a vision of this dreadful time that inspired the prophet to plead and pray for us, stating, "*I said, 'O Lord God, stop! How will Yaakov survive? He is so small'*" (Amos 7:5). This persecution should not cause one whose faith in Hashem is strong to come to doubt or one who believes in Moshe to waver. There can be no doubt that these are the pangs of the Age of Mashiach about which the Sages begged Hashem that they be spared from suffering. The prophets trembled when they foresaw them. As it is stated, "*My mind is confused, I shudder in panic. The twilight that I longed for has turned to terror*" (Yeshayah 21:4). Hashem Himself in the Torah exclaims His sympathy for those who will experience the times preceding

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<sup>1</sup>His name is Abd el-Nabi ibn Mahdi. In c. 1170 he conquered Yemen and forced all Jews to convert to Islam.

<sup>2</sup>The Berber Almohads (from 1150–1180), forced the Jews of Morocco to convert to Islam.

<sup>3</sup>Ref. to Shmuel I 3:11.

<sup>4</sup>Yemen and Morocco.

<sup>5</sup>Ref. to Yehoshua 8:22.

Mashiach, stating, "Alas, who can survive God's devastation!" (Bamidbar 24:23).

You write that the minds of some people have become clouded. As uncertainty grips their hearts, their faith begins to waver, and their hope falters. Others have not lost faith and have neither weakened nor become fearful.

Regarding this matter, we have a Divine prophecy by Daniel. He foretold that as a result of the long stay in exile and the continuous persecutions, many would forsake our faith as doubt entered their minds and made them go astray. The primary reason for this breakdown is that they witnessed our weakness in contrast to the power of our oppressors and their mastery over us. Others would not be plagued by doubts. Their belief would remain firm and unshaken. This is expressed in the verse, "*Many will be purified and purged and refined; the wicked will act wickedly and none of the wicked will understand; but the knowledgeable will understand*" (Daniel 12:10). Daniel also prophesied that even these knowledgeable people and men of understanding who would have put up with milder misfortunes and remained steadfast in their faith in God and His servant Moshe, would give way to disbelief and would stray when they were made to endure harsher and more severe afflictions. Only a few of them would remain pure in faith, as it is stated, "*Some of the knowledgeable will stumble, that they may be refined and purged and whitened until the time of the end, for an interval still remains until the appointed time*" (Daniel 11:35).

## TWO STRATEGIES

And now, dear brothers, it is essential that you pay attention and listen to what I am about to present to you. Teach it to your wives and children, so their faith, which has been weakened by misgivings, may be strengthened. May their souls be bolstered by the unshakable truth. May Hashem save us and all of you from religious doubt!

Bear in mind that our Torah is the true Divine Teaching that was given to us through Moshe, the master of both the early and the later prophets. By means of His Torah, God has distinguished us from the rest of mankind. As it says, "*It was only with your ancestors that Hashem developed a closeness. He loved them and therefore*

*chose you, their descendants, from among all nations—as is now the case”* (Devarim 10:15). This did not happen because we were worthy of it. Rather, it was an act of Divine kindness, because our forefathers recognized Hashem and worshipped Him. As it says, “*It was not because you had greater numbers than all the other nations that Hashem preferred you . . . It was because of Hashem’s love for you, and because He was keeping the oath He made to your fathers*” (Devarim 7:7).

Hashem made us special through His laws and decrees. The other nations recognize our superiority because we are guided by His rules and statutes. As it says, “[*The nations will say,] What nation is so great that they have such righteous rules and laws’*” (Devarim 4:8). As a result, the nations of the world became terribly envious of us. Because of the Torah, all the kings of the earth stirred up hatred and jealousy against us. Their real intention is to make war against Hashem, but no one can oppose the Almighty. Ever since the time of the Giving of the Torah, every non-Jewish king, no matter how he rose to power, has made it his first objective to destroy the Torah. Amalek, Sisera, Sanheriv, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian, and many others like them tried to overturn our religion by force, by violence, and by the sword. [*The nations who want to annihilate us through violence*] are one of two groups whose aim is to defeat the Divine will.

The second group consists of the brightest and most educated among the nations, such as the Syrians, Persians, and Greeks. They also attempt to tear down our religion and wipe out our Torah [but they do it] by means of arguments they offer and questions they dream up. They try to demolish the Torah and to erase its last trace with their writings. The tyrants tried to do the same with their wars.

Neither the one nor the other will succeed. Hashem proclaimed through the prophet Yeshayah, that He will destroy the armaments of any despot or oppressor who intends to destroy our Torah and abolish our religion by weapons of war. In the same way, whenever a disputant will argue to undermine our religion, he will lose the debate. His theory will be exploded and refuted. This thought is expressed in the following verse, “*No weapon formed against you will succeed, and every tongue that contends with you at law you will defeat. Such is the lot of the servants of Hashem, such is their triumph through Me—declares Hashem*” (Yeshayah 54:17).

Although advocates of both strategies (compulsory conversion and conversion through argumentation) realized that [Judaism] is a

structure that cannot easily be demolished, they made a concerted effort to tear down its solid foundations. They are only increasing their toil and pain while the structure remains as strong as ever. Hashem, who is the Truth, mocks and ridicules them, because, with their feeble intelligence they try to reach an unattainable goal. Observing their attempt to wreck the true faith and watching Hashem ridicule them, David was inspired to say, "[About those that say:] 'Let us break the cords of their yoke, shake off their ropes from us!' He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; Hashem mocks at them" (Tehillim 2:3). Both groups have troubled and tormented us without letup throughout the era of our independence and during part of the period of our exile.

After that, a new sect arose that made our lives miserable by combining the approaches of the two groups: brute force and persuasion. It believed that this method would be more effective in wiping out the last vestige of the Jewish nation. It, therefore, conceived a plan to claim Divine revelation and establish a new religion, contrary to our God-given Torah. It declared publicly that both revelations were given by God. It meant to raise doubts and sow confusion. The new religion claimed to believe in the same God but to be the recipients of a new set of commandments. Thereby it hoped to destroy our Torah.

The first one who devised this plan was Jeshu the Nazarene, may his bones be crushed. He was a Jew because his mother was Jewish although his father was a gentile. Our law states that a child born of a Jewish woman and a gentile or a slave is a kosher Jew. We only call him a *mamzer* (illegitimate child) in a manner of speaking. He led people to believe that he was sent by Hashem to explain bewildering passages in the Torah, and that he was the Mashiach who was predicted by each and every prophet. He interpreted the Torah in a way that would invalidate it completely, do away with all its mitzvos, and sanction all its prohibitions. The Sages guessed his purpose before his fame spread among the people, and condemned him to receive the punishment he deserved. Daniel predicted his emergence when he spoke of the downfall of a renegade and heretic who would arise in Yisrael. He spoke of one who would attempt to destroy the Torah and boast of having prophetic powers, of being able to perform miracles and who would declare himself as Mashiach, as it says, "*The lawless sons of your people will assert themselves to claim prophecy, but they will fail*" (Daniel 11:14).

Long after he lived, the descendants of Eisav created a religion and traced its origins to him. He did not establish a new faith, and did not actually do any harm to Yisrael, since neither the community as a whole nor any individuals were shaken in their beliefs because of him. His flaws were obvious to everyone. He fell into our hands and his fate is known to all.

After him, the Madman (Mohammed) arose. He followed in his forerunner's footsteps and attempted to convert us. He had the added ambition of pursuing political power, seeking to subjugate the people under his rule, and he originated his well-known religion [of Islam].

## THE SUPERIORITY OF THE TORAH

These men had one purpose: to place their false religions on the same level with our Divine faith. Only a child who knows nothing about either religion would equate our God-given faith to man-made theories. Our religion is as different from other religions as a living, thinking human being differs from a wooden, metal, or stone statue that looks like a man. On the surface and in its shape, form, and appearance the statue looks exactly like man. The simple-minded person who knows nothing of Divine wisdom or of the art of sculpture thinks that it is made the same way man is made; he does not understand the inner workings of both. A knowledgeable person, who knows the inner nature of both, knows that the internal structure of the statue does not manifest any skillful workmanship at all. The inner parts of man are the true wonders that reveal the wisdom of the Creator: the nerves extending into the muscles that allow man to move his limbs at will; the attachment of ligaments, how they cling to bone, and the manner in which they grow; the connection of bones and joints; blood vessels that pulsate and those that do not and how they branch out; the placement of man's organs overlapping one another; how every part of the body has its proper composition, form, and place.

Similarly, a person unfamiliar with the Holy Scriptures' secret meaning and the commandments' deeper significance may think that our religion has something in common with, or is comparable to, the spurious manmade faith. He is misled. Both in Judaism and in the false religion there are things that you may not do and things that you must do; both in Judaism and the false religion there are

various forms of worship. The Torah provides many positive and negative commandments, punishments, and rewards, and so does the fraudulent, manmade religion.

But if he knew the deeper meaning of the commandments, he would realize that the God-given Torah is true. It is the essence of Divine wisdom. Every commandment and prohibition moves man closer to perfection and removes the barriers that prevent him from attaining excellence. Through these commandments, both the broad masses and the individual will be able to reach moral and intellectual refinement, each according to his ability and perception. Through the mitzvos, the community of God becomes elevated, reaching a twofold perfection. By the first perfection, I mean living in this world under the most pleasant and gratifying conditions. The second perfection is the attainment of intellectual heights for each person according to his ability.

The other religions that resemble our religion really have no deeper meaning. They are only stories and imaginary tales in which the founder is trying to glorify himself, stating that he is as great as so-and-so. The Sages saw through the deception. They saw the entire religion as a farce and a joke, just as people laugh at a monkey who apes the actions of men.

## PROOFS FROM THE PROPHETS

Hashem made it known to us through Daniel that something like this would happen in the future. He revealed to us that in the future, a person would arise who would announce a religion similar to the true one. He would speak haughtily. He would claim through prophetic powers that the prophetic spirit had given him a scripture, that God had spoken to him, that he had replied to Him, and many other claims such as these. Daniel had a vision of a horn that grew and became long and strong. In it, he prophesied the rise of the Arabic kingdom, the emergence of the Madman (Mohammed), and how he would triumph over the kingdoms of Syria, Persia, and Greece. This is clearly shown in verses that can be understood by everyone. This interpretation is borne out by historical facts. The verses cannot be explained any other way. Daniel says, "While I was gazing upon these horns, a new little horn sprouted up among them; three of the older horns were uprooted to make room for

*it. . . . There were eyes in this horn like those of a man, and a mouth that spoke arrogantly" (Daniel 7:8).*

Now consider how marvelously fitting this allegory is. Daniel says that he saw a little horn sprouting. As he was wondering about its length and that it uprooted three horns, he noticed that this horn had eyes like those of a man and a mouth that spoke arrogantly. Clearly this refers to the person who will establish a religion that will resemble Hashem's Torah and who will claim to be a prophet. Daniel lets us know that this person wants to destroy, abolish, and alter our Torah. He states, "*He will think of changing times and laws. They will be delivered into his power for a time, times, and half a time*" (Daniel 7:25).

Hashem informed Daniel that He would destroy this religion in spite of its greatness and the great length of its reign, together with the remnants of the nations that preceded it.

The three groups that tried to wipe us out: that is to say, the one that tried to overwhelm us with the sword, the second that sought to defeat us by arguments, and the third that founded a religion similar to ours, will perish in the end.

Although they will seem to be powerful and victorious for a while, their power will not last and their triumph will not endure. Hashem so ordained it. He promised us from time immemorial that whenever Jews are forced to convert or any evil decree is issued against us, He will in the end remove and abolish it. David saw, through Divine Spirit, the future of the Jewish people. He saw heathen nations oppress us, rule over us, persecute us, and try to force us into apostasy, but they were not able to annihilate us. He exclaimed in the name of Yisrael, "*Since my youth they have often assailed me, let Yisrael now declare; since my youth they have often assailed me, but they have never overcome me*" (Tehillim 129:1,2).

## PARALLELS IN HISTORY

My brothers, you all know that in the time of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews were forced to worship idols. Only Daniel, Chananyaah, Mishael, and Azariah were spared.<sup>6</sup> Yet ultimately,

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<sup>6</sup>In the third chapter of Daniel, we are told that these three men refused to bow down to an idol. They were thrown into a fiery furnace and miraculously, they came out unscathed.

Hashem crushed Nebuchadnezzar and abolished his laws, and the religion of truth was restored.

During the second Temple, when the wicked Greek kingdom came to power, the Greeks instituted brutal and harsh measures against Yisrael in order to destroy the Torah. They forced the Jews to desecrate the Shabbos and prohibited the observance of *bris milah* (circumcision). Every Jew was compelled to write on his garment the words, "We have no portion in Hashem, the God of Yisrael." He also had to etch this phrase on the horn of his ox and then to plow with it. These decrees were in force for about fifty-two years. After this time, Hashem demolished both their regime and their laws.

The Sages often refer to persecutions. We find, "Once the wicked Greek rulers forced the Jews to abandon their faith," and, "they issued such and such decree." After a while, Hashem would nullify and cancel the decree and obliterate the nation that issued it. Noting this historic pattern prompted the Sages of blessed memory to say, "Persecutions do not last" (Kesuvos 3b).

Hashem promised Yaakov that his offspring would outlive the nations who enslaved and oppressed them. They would survive and rise again while the tyrants would fade away, as it is written, "*Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth*" (Bereishis 28:14). Although Yaakov's descendants will be degraded and stepped on like dust, eventually, they will win and emerge triumphant. In a metaphoric sense we can say, just as the dust finally settles on he who steps on it and exists long after he has perished, [so will Yisrael outlive their tormentors.]

Yeshayah foretold in Divine prophecy that while the Jewish people are in exile, any nation that wishes to overpower and oppress them will be successful. In the end Hashem will help the Jewish people. He will remove their affliction and pain. Yeshayah says, "*A harsh prophecy has been announced to me: 'The betrayer is betraying, the ravager ravaging. Advance, Elam! Lay siege Media! I will put an end to all her sighing'*" (Yeshayah 21:2).

# *Encouraging Words*

Hashem has assured us through his prophets that Yisrael will never be destroyed and we will never stop being His treasured nation. Just as it is unthinkable for Hashem to cease to exist, so is it impossible for Yisrael to be destroyed and annihilated. As it says, "*For I am Hashem—I have not changed; and you the children of Jacob—have not ceased to be*" (Malachi 3:6). He announced and confirmed to us that it is inconceivable that He will reject us entirely, even if we anger Him by violating His commandments. As it is written, "*Thus says Hashem, 'If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Yisrael for all that they have done—declares Hashem'*" (Yirmiyah 31:37).

Indeed, the very same promise has been made to us in the Torah through Moshe our teacher: "*Thus even when they are in their enemies' land, I will not grow so disgusted with them nor so tired of them that I would destroy them and break My covenant with them, for I am Hashem their God*" (Vayikra 26:44).

Dear brothers, be strong and brave. Place your trust in these true Scriptures. Don't be disheartened by the persecutions that continually befall you. Don't be frightened by the power of our enemy and the helplessness of our people. These trials are meant to test you and to prove your faith and your love of Hashem. The God-fearing Torah scholars of the pure and untainted lineage of Yaakov will remain faithful to the true religion in times like these. About these the prophet states, "*And among the remnant are those whom Hashem will call*" (Yoel 3:5). The prophet makes it clear that they are only a few individuals. They are the men whose ancestors stood at Mount Sinai and heard Hashem's words, entered into the covenant of Hashem, and took upon themselves to do and obey. They said, "*We will do and obey all that Hashem has declared*" (Shemos 24:7). They obligated not only themselves but also their descendants, as we read, "*That which has been revealed applies to us and our children forever*" (Devarim 29:28). Hashem assured us, like a man who vouches for

his neighbor – and we certainly can rely on His guarantee – that not only all those who stood at Mount Sinai [when Hashem gave the Torah] believe in the prophecy of Moshe our Teacher and in the laws he transmitted to us. Their descendants likewise would do so, until the end of time. Hashem said, “*I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will then believe in you forever*” (Shemos 19:9).

It follows, therefore, that anyone who rejects the religion that was given at this Revelation at Sinai is not a descendant of the people who witnessed it. In the same vein, our Sages of blessed memory stated that whoever harbors doubts about the Divine prophecy is not a descendant of the people who were present at Mount Sinai (*Nedarim* 20a). May Hashem save me and you from doubt. May He keep away from all of us the thoughts that lead to skepticism and failure.

### ADVICE FOR THE YEMENITE JEWS

And so, dear brothers who are scattered through the far reaches of [Yemen], you should encourage one another. Let the elders hearten the youth and the leaders inspire the masses. Convince your community of the immutable and unalterable truth. Proclaim loudly that our faith will never fail and will never be destroyed. Announce publicly [the principles of our religion]:

The Holy One Blessed is He is One. There is no other unity like His.<sup>1</sup>

Moshe is His prophet who spoke with Him, he is the master of all prophets, and he is superior to all other prophets. He perceived the Godly surpassing every other prophet whether he preceded him or arose afterwards.<sup>2</sup>

The entire Torah, starting from the verse “*In the beginning*” (*Bereishis* 1:1), until the verse “*before the eyes of all Yisrael*” (*Devarim* 34:12), was transmitted by Hashem to Moshe, as it says, “*With him I speak mouth to mouth*” (*Bamidbar* 12:8).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The second of the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith.

<sup>2</sup>The seventh principle of the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith.

<sup>3</sup>The eighth principle of the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith.

[The Torah] will neither be revoked nor altered, nothing can ever be added or subtracted from it. Never will Hashem give another Torah or a new positive or negative commandment.<sup>4</sup>

Keep in mind that Hashem commanded us to remember and never to forget, the Revelation on Mount Sinai. He instructed us to teach this event to our children so that they will grow up with this lesson etched in their minds. As it is written, "*Only take heed and watch yourself very carefully, so that you do not forget the things that your eyes saw. Do not let [this memory] leave your hearts, all the days of your lives. Teach your children and children's children about the day that you stood before Hashem at Chorev*" (Devarim 4:9-10).

It is essential, my dear brothers, that you impress on your children's minds this momentous Stand at Sinai. Proclaim at mass meetings its overriding significance. Stress that it is the cornerstone of our faith and the proof of its truthfulness. Accentuate the pivotal importance of this event, as Hashem did in the verse, "*You might inquire about times long past, going back to the time that Hashem created man on earth, and from one end of the heavens to the other. See if anything as great as this has ever happened, or if the like has ever been heard*" (Devarim 4:32).

## THE PURPOSE OF THE REVELATION AT SINAI

Remember, my fellow Jews, the fact that [the Torah is of Divine origin] is attested to by the best possible evidence. Never before or since has an entire nation heard the Divine word or witnessed His glory with their own eyes. The purpose of this was to implant the faith firmly in us so that nothing can shake it, and to give us conviction that will uphold us so that we will not slip<sup>5</sup> in these trying times of recurring persecution and forced conversion, when our enemy will have gained the upper hand. As it is stated, "*For Hashem has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be on your faces, so that you will not sin*" (Shemos 20:17). The verse explains that the reason Hashem revealed Himself to the Jewish people was in order to enable them to withstand all trials until the

<sup>4</sup>The ninth principle of the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith.

<sup>5</sup>Tehillim 37:31.

end of time. They will not be swayed and not be led astray. You, dear brothers, keep the faith, stay on course, and remain true to your belief.

## FORCED APOSTASY PREDICTED IN THE TORAH

King Shlomoh compared the Jewish people to a woman of matchless grace and flawless beauty. He stated, "*Every part of you is beautiful, my beloved, there is no blemish in you*" (Shir Hashirim 4:7). By contrast, he describes the followers of other religions and philosophies who want to lure us and convert us to their creed as worthless men. They seduce virtuous women in order to satisfy their depraved lust. This is exactly what they are doing to us when they beguile and ensnare us in their web of deceit and falsehood. These nations try to lead the Jewish people astray by contending that their religion is better than the Jewish faith. Yisrael says to them in rebuttal, "*Why do you take hold of me? Have you anything to show like 'the encirclement of the two camps?'*" (Shir Hashirim 7:1). The meaning of this metaphor is, "Show me something, as magnificent as the Revelation on Sinai in which the camp of Yisrael faced the camp of the Divine Presence. Then we will accept your teaching."

This thought is allegorically expressed in the verses, "[*The Gentile nations say to Yisrael:*<sup>6</sup>] '*Turn away, turn away [from Hashem], Shulamis! Turn away, turn away, that we may gaze upon you, [we shall choose nobility for you].*' [*But Yisrael replies:*] '*What can you bestow on Shulamis that can equal mecholas hamachanaim [literally, the encirclement of the two camps]?*'" (Shir Hashirim 7:1).

Now, the name *Shulamis* signifies "the nation whose faith in Hashem is perfect."<sup>7</sup> The expression *mecholas hamachanaim* signifies "the encirclement of the two camps." This alludes to the joy of the Stand at Sinai, which was shared by both the camp of Yisrael and the camp of Hashem. As we see in the following verses: "*Moshe led the people out of the camp toward the Divine Presence. They stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain.*" (Shemos 19:17), and "*Hashem's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands; Hashem is among them as in Sinai in holiness*" (Tehillim 68:18).

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<sup>6</sup>Commentary between brackets is Rashi's interpretation of this verse.

<sup>7</sup>From the root *shalem*, "perfect."

Now pay close attention to the fitting imagery and the deeper meaning of the verse [in Shir Hashirim]. Note that the phrase *turn away* is repeated four times. This alludes to the four empires that will try to force us to abandon our faith. Incidentally, we are living today under the domination of the fourth and last empire.

In the Torah, Hashem foretold that while [we are in exile, the nations of the world] would compel us to embrace their religion. As it says, "*There you will serve Gods that men have made*" (Devarim 4:28). However, this will not happen all over the world; we will never be completely cut off from the Torah. Hashem gave us His assurance. He stated, "*[The Torah] will not be forgotten by their descendants*" (Devarim 31:21). Yeshayah, the harbinger of our nation's redemption, already declared that the Divine guarantee of our survival as a nation is the permanence of the Torah among us. As it is written, "*'And as for Me, this is My covenant with them,' said Hashem. 'My spirit that is upon you and My words that I have placed in your mouth shall not be absent from your mouth, nor out of the mouth of your children nor from the mouth of your children's children' said Hashem, 'from now on, for all time'*" (Yeshayah 59:21).

## OUR RESPONSE

With pride, our nation speaks to Hashem of the dreadful oppression and persecution it has suffered. We state, "*It is for Your sake that we are killed all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be led to slaughter*" (Tehillim 44:23). The Sages comment that the phrase, "*It is for Your sake that we are killed all day long,*" refers to the generation that suffers forced apostasy (*Midrash Shir Hashirim* 1:3).

We should rejoice in the fact that we have suffered misfortune, lost our wealth and possessions, and were driven into exile. All these hardships are a source of distinction and honor in the eyes of Hashem. Whatever losses we suffered through these disasters are counted as a burnt offering on the altar. The following verse<sup>8</sup> expresses this thought: "*Dedicate yourselves to Hashem today, . . . that He may bestow a blessing on you*" (Shemos 32:29).

[Those who are being pressured into converting] should run away and remain faithful to Hashem. They should flee into the

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<sup>8</sup>As translated by Targum Onkelos.

desert and hide in uninhabited places. They should give no thought to being separated from family and friends or being concerned with loss of income. Such deprivations are only a small sacrifice and a trifle [we can offer] to the King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He, Ruler of the universe, whose Name is glorious and awesome, Hashem your God. He can be trusted to give you a rich reward in this world and in the world to come.

Many pious and pure-hearted people, who seek the truth and pursue it, follow the practice of [leaving home and family]. They leave [society] behind. They advance from the far reaches of the world to the place where the word of Hashem is manifest. They make their way to the homes of the pious sages. They want to gain a deeper understanding of the Torah and earn a rich reward from Hashem. How much more so is one obligated to leave his homeland and his family, if it means preserving the Torah in its entirety.

Sometimes when a man cannot earn a livelihood in one country, he becomes disgusted with it, he feels cramped and fenced in, and he moves to another country. Surely, when a Jew is prevented from observing the Torah and the Divine faith, he should run away to another place. If he finds it impossible to leave at the present, he should not gradually backslide, lapse into sin and feel free to desecrate the Shabbos and eat forbidden foods. He should not think that he is exempt from observing the laws of the Torah. Whether he likes it or not, every descendant of Yaakov, as well as his children and children's offspring, is forever and inescapably bound to the Torah. Furthermore, a violator will be punished for every negative commandment he transgresses. Let no one think that since he was forced to commit some major sins he can freely and with impunity violate the commandments with the lesser penalties. *Yerovam ben Nevat*, may his bones be crushed, was punished, not only for erecting the two golden calves that he worshipped and enticed Yisrael to worship, he was also punished for his failure to observe the mitzvah of building a *sukkah* on *Sukkos*. This is one of the fundamental principles of the Torah and our religion. Master it, and apply it to your own situation.

# *Refuting Moslem Claims*

## **THE FALLACY OF MOSLEM ARGUMENTS**

In your letter you mention that the apostate introduced doubt in the minds of several people. He claimed that a number of verses in the Torah allude to the Madman [Mohammed].

With the verse, "*I will bless him (Yishmael), and make him fruitful, increasing his numbers bimeod meod – very greatly*" (Bereishis 17:20), Moslem apologists contend that *bimeod meod*, which sounds like Muchammad, is an allusion to Mohammed. They also contend that the numeric value of both *bimeod meod* and Muchammad is 92.

They argue that the verse, "*He appeared from Mount Paran*" (Devarim 33:2), alludes to Mohammed [since Mount Paran is a reference to Yishmael, son of Avraham, and ancestor of the Arab nation, who lived in the wilderness of Paran].

They also believe that the passage, "*Hashem your God will raise up for you a prophet from among you, from your brothers, like myself*" (Devarim 18:15), and the promise to Yishmael, "*I will make him into a great nation*" (Bereishis 17:20), refer to Mohammed.

These arguments have been bandied about so much that everyone is sick and tired of them. To say that they are absolutely unsound is an understatement. To use these verses as proofs is ludicrous and outrageous. Such statements do not confuse anyone, not even the gullible masses.

The apostates who amuse themselves by concocting these "scriptural proofs" do not believe a word of them. They do not even entertain any doubts about their veracity. Their purpose in quoting these verses is to creep into the good graces of the Moslems and ingratiate themselves with them by showing that they are believers. Even knowledgeable Moslems do not believe these proofs. In trying to support the statement of the Koran that the Madman [Mohammed] is mentioned in the Torah, they don't rely on or accept these arguments. Clearly these proofs are worthless.

The Moslems, when they could not find a single usable proof in the Torah—even by inference or hint—were forced to say that we revised and edited the Torah, deleting every mention of the name [Mohammed] from it. They could not find a more tenable argument in support of the Koran, even though it is absolutely absurd and does not hold water.

It is obvious to one and all [that nothing was deleted from the Torah], for the following reasons: First, the Torah was translated into Aramaic, Persian, Greek, and Latin hundreds of years before the emergence of the *pasul*, the “Defective One” [Mohammed]. Second, the Torah text has been transmitted from generation to generation, both in the East and the West. There has never been found the slightest difference in the text, not even in the vocalization. There exists not even a variation between a *kametz chataf* and a *shuruk*.<sup>1</sup> The Moslems only used this feeble argument, because they could not find any inference to Mohammed in the Torah.

## YITZCHAK IS HEIR TO AVRAHAM'S BLESSING

As for the true meaning of the verse, “*I will make of him (Yishmael) a great nation*” (Bereishis 17:20); the word “great” does not denote greatness in wisdom and prophecy. It only refers to vastness in numbers. Similarly, the Torah describes idol worshipers as, “*nations greater and more populous than you*” (Devarim 4:38).

What of the promise to Yishmael, “[*I will increase his number*] bimeod meod—very greatly,” (Bereishis 17:20)? If this Scripture intended to predict that Mohammed would descend from Yishmael it would have said, “*I will bless him bimeod meod—very greatly.*” A very weak argument could then be made to interpret this to mean, “*I will bless him by making Mohammed (which sounds like bimeod meod) one of his descendants.*” But since the phrase *bimeod meod* follows after “*I will increase his number,*” it is clear that this is intended only as a superlative, as if to say, “*exceedingly numerous.*”

Hashem clearly explained to Avraham that all Divine promises regarding blessings and commandments to be given to his offspring

<sup>1</sup>Two similar sounding vowels.

and their separateness from the nations refer only to Yitzchak's descendants, not to the other one [Yishmael]. Yishmael's blessing comes only as an adjunct and is secondary to Yitzchak's blessing. This is evident in the passage, "*Also I will make the son of the slave-woman into a nation, for he is your child*" (Bereishis 21:13). This passage clearly places Yitzchak in first place, making the other one (Yishmael) inferior. In addition, the Torah expressly spells it out, "*It is through Yitzchak that there will be called for you a lineage*" (Bereishis 21:12). Even if we were to concede that Yishmael's offspring would be very great in numbers, they would still not be renowned and acclaimed for their qualities of righteousness and human perfection. On the other hand, Yitzchak's descendants will be celebrated for their righteousness. This is implied in the expression *yikarei lecha* – "will be called for you." This expression signifies fame and renown, as in "*veyikarei vahem shemi* – In them may my name be called" (Bereishis 48:16), meaning, "May my name become famous through them."

Regarding the blessings, Hashem specifically sets forth that these were given to Avraham. Included in this blessing was that the covenant and the Torah would exist in his descendants. Hashem put it into these words, "*To you and your descendants I will give the land where you are now living as a foreigner. The whole land of Canaan shall be your eternal heritage, and I will be a God to your descendants*" (Bereishis 17:8). Hashem singled out Yitzchak. Yishmael was excluded from all the blessings.

He then specifically selected Yitzchak for a covenant, eliminating Yishmael, as it says, "*But My covenant I will maintain with Yitzchak*" (Bereishis 17:20). Hashem then bestowed a blessing on Yishmael, stating, "*I will bless him and make him fruitful,*" (Bereishis 17:20). The process of the transmission of the blessings is later clarified by Yitzchak when he passed on Avraham's blessings to Yaakov, leaving out Eisav. Yitzchak phrased his blessing to Yaakov in the following terms, "*May He grant the blessing of Avraham to you and your offspring*" (Bereishis 28:4).

It is now abundantly clear that the pledges Hashem made to Avraham and his descendants would be fulfilled exclusively first in Yitzchak and then in Yaakov, Yitzchak's son. This is confirmed by a passage that states, "*He is ever mindful of His covenant . . . that He made with Avraham, swore to Yitzchak, and confirmed in a decree for Yaakov, for Yisrael, as an eternal covenant* (Tehillim 105:8,9).

## POINT BY POINT REFUTATION OF MOSLEM ALLEGATIONS

Let me point out that the idea the Moslems have adopted that the name Mohammed occurs in the Torah—a notion that was dreamed up by the apostates—is senseless. They claim that the phrase *bimeod meod* alludes to Muhammad. But the name that is used in the Koran and the “Gospels”<sup>2</sup> is Achmed. And of course, the numeric value of *bimeod meod*—92—is not the same as that of Achmed, which is 53.

With regard to the so-called proof of “*hofia me’har Paran*—He appeared from Mount Paran” (Devarim 33:1), *hofia*—“he appeared” is written in the past tense. If it would have read “*yofia*—He will appear,” the Moslem spokesman might have used the passage to taunt us and lend credence to his belief, but the word “*hofia*—He **appeared**,” points to an event that happened in the past. In fact, it refers to the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. It is telling us that when Hashem revealed Himself on Mount Sinai, He did not plummet down from heaven like a barrage of hailstones; he came down gently from higher mountaintops to lower mountaintops until He descended on Mount Sinai, as it says, “*Hashem came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran. From the holy myriads, He brought a law of fire to them from His right Hand*” (Devarim 33:2). This interpretation is indisputable to anyone with an open mind.

Notice how unerringly accurate is the choice of words in the text. Hashem’s descent on Paran, which is a more distant mountain, is described with the vague term of *hofia*, “He appeared,” while His emergence on Mount Seir, which is closer, is characterized with the more clear-cut verb *zarach*, “He shone.” Mount Sinai was His final destination, the place where His glory came to rest. As we read, “*Hashem’s glory rested on Mount Sinai*” (Shemos 24:16). And so, with regard to Mount Sinai we find the plainest and most explicit phraseology, “*Hashem came from Sinai*.”

It is noteworthy that Devorah portrays the Revelation on Mount Sinai in much the same way. She, too, is telling us that Hashem’s glory came down gently from mountain to mountain. Devorah expresses it this way: “*Hashem, when You came forth from*

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<sup>2</sup>The Rambam uses the word *avon galui*—“an open sin,” as a play on the Greek word *evangelion*, which means “good tidings” or gospels.

*Seir, Advanced from the country of Edom, The earth trembled; The heavens dripped, Yea, the clouds dripped water" (Shofetim 5:4).*

The Sages (*Avodah Zarah* 2b) offer a beautiful allegorical interpretation of this verse. They say that initially, Hashem sent a messenger to the Edomites to offer them the Torah, but they rejected it. Then He offered it to the Yishmaelites but they, too, rejected it. Finally, He sent Moshe Rabbeinu to us and we readily accepted the Torah, exclaiming, "We will do and obey all that Hashem has declared" (*Shemos* 24:7). Now all this took place before the Giving of the Torah, as is evident in the words "He came," "He shone," and "He appeared," which are all in the past tense, and do not presage future events.<sup>3</sup>

## DISCUSSION OF PROPHECY

There still remains the proof they derive from the passage, "*Hashem your God will raise up for you a prophet from among you, from your brothers, kamoni—like myself; him you shall obey*" (*Devarim* 18:15). In your letter you mention that [the word *kamoni*—like myself—in] this verse raised uncertainty in the minds of some of the people. [They claim that the Torah is foretelling the arrival of a prophet as great as Moshe]. Others cast off their doubts, as they realize that the Torah speaks of a prophet "from among you, from your brothers," [which Mohammed obviously is not]. [This leads me to believe that] were it not for the phrase "*from among you, from among your brothers*," they would have considered this verse a valid proof. Please concentrate and pay very close attention to what I am about to tell you:

You must understand that you cannot simply take a word or a phrase out of context and use it to prove a point. You must consider the background clauses, both those that lead up to the statement and those that follow it. In other words, before using a fragment of a verse to bolster your argument, you must look at the entire verse and the paragraph in which that verse is found. Only then can you grasp the meaning of that phrase. Only then can you use that phrase to prove your hypothesis. A statement that is detached from its surrounding clauses cannot be advanced as proof. For if it were permissible to bring proof from passages taken out of context, you

<sup>3</sup>Whereas the Moslems falsely maintain that it alludes to Mohammed, who was born almost 2,000 years after the Giving of the Torah.

could say that Hashem has forbidden us to obey any prophet. After all, it is written, "*Do not heed the words of that prophet*" (Devarim 13:4). What's more [following this logic], you could say that Hashem commands us to worship idols—Hashem forbid—for it says in the Torah, "*You shall serve other Gods and bow to them*" (Devarim 11:16). Many other such examples can be cited. This demonstrates the idiocy of such proofs and establishes the rule that you cannot adduce any proof whatsoever from a word or phrase unless you understand the context of that word.

Now, take the present verse, "*a prophet from among you, from your brothers, like myself.*" Consider the context;

*Let there not be found among you one who passes his son or daughter through fire, an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, one who practices witchcraft, who uses incantations, who consults mediums and oracles, or who attempts to communicate with the dead* (Devarim 18:10,11). *You must be totally faithful to Hashem your God. The nations that you are driving out listen to astrologers and stick-diviners, but what Hashem has given you is totally different. Hashem your God will raise up for you a prophet from among you, from your brothers, like myself, and it is to him that you must listen* (Devarim 18:13,15).

The paragraph begins by warning us against becoming involved with sorcerers, soothsayers, and the like. In other words, [don't involve yourselves] with people who perform occult practices by means of which the gentiles think they can predict future events. In warning us against engaging in such practices, Hashem tells us that the gentiles think that these procedures are effective in forecasting the future. But we should not use such means to ascertain what the future holds. We are to learn these things from a prophet whom He will raise up for us to inform us of what lies ahead. This prophet will foretell the future without resorting to sorcery, black magic, astrology, or other occult practices.

The Torah goes on to tell us that finding out what the future holds will not require any effort on our part. Every prophet that Hashem will send us will come *from among you*. Thus, you will not have to travel great distances, journeying from town to town, before you can find him. Next, the Torah tells you another thing: in addition to being close to you and among you, he will also be one of your brothers. He will be a Jew. Therefore, the attribute of Divine

prophecy will be restricted to the Jewish people. To emphasize this point the words *like myself* have been added. You might mistakenly infer that *from your brothers*, also includes [a prophet who is a descendant] of Eisav or Yishmael. Such a mistake could easily be made. We do read that when Moshe sent envoys to the king of Edom [a descendant of Eisav] he addressed him as "brother," stating, "*Thus says your brother Yisrael . . .*" (Bamidbar 20:14). To preclude this error it was necessary to add the clause, "*like myself*," meaning "a Jew."

To contend that the phrase "like myself" implies that a prophet will arise who will be as great as Moshe is impossible, for we read, "*Never again did there arise in Yisrael a prophet like Moshe*" (Devarim 34:10).

## THE TRUE AND THE FALSE PROPHET

It should be absolutely clear that the prophet who will arise will not issue any new commandments or create innovations in the Torah. He will not resort to occult practices, but we will be able to ask him about future events, the way the gentiles consult astrologers and fortunetellers. An example of this is when young Shaul went to ask the prophet Shmuel where he could find his father's donkeys that had gone astray (Shmuel I 9:3-14).

The reason we do not believe the prophecies of Zeid and Amar is not because they are not Jewish. Many people have this erroneous idea because they infer this from the phrase, "*a prophet from among you, from your brothers.*" After all, *Iyov* and his friends Tzofer, Bildad, Elifaz, and Elihu received prophecy, even though they were not Jewish. On the other hand, Chananiah ben Azur, a Jew, was a false prophet. A prophet should be believed because of what he preaches, not for reasons of lineage.

It is an established fact that Moshe Rabbeinu is the supreme prophet. When we heard the Divine Voice speak to him we believed in him and his prophecy. We said to him, "*You approach Hashem our God, and listen to all He says*" (Devarim 8:24). Moshe told us that there are no commandments left in heaven to be given. There exists neither another faith nor another Torah beside the one we received. He said, "*It is not in heaven, so [that you should] say, "Who shall go up to heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?"*" (Devarim

30:12). He warned us neither to add nor to subtract from the Torah, saying, "*Do not add to it and do not subtract from it*" (Devarim 13:1). Further, in Hashem's Name, he required us, our children, and children's children to believe in this Torah until the end of time. This is evident in the following verse, "*Hidden things concern Hashem our God, but that which has been revealed applies to us and our children forever. [We must therefore] keep all the words of the Torah*" (Devarim 29:28).

If a prophet ever appears, regardless of his lineage, who says that one of the commandments of the Torah has been abrogated, he contradicts and denies what Moshe said: that the Torah applies "to us and our children forever." Therefore, we must denounce him. If we have the power to do so, we must put him to death. We must disregard any miracles he might perform, just as we pay no attention to a prophet who tells us to worship other gods. As we read, "*Even if the miracle or sign comes true, do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer*" (Devarim 13:3,4). Since Moshe told us never to worship other gods, we know with certainty that the "miracles" he performed in the name of the foreign deity are nothing but trickery and magic. Since Moshe told us explicitly that the Torah will last forever, we know that any prophet who claims that it is valid for only a set length of time is a false prophet. He is contradicting Moshe Rabbeinu. Consequently, we should not even ask him to corroborate his message through a sign or miracle. If he did perform a miracle we should ignore and dismiss it. We must realize that our belief in Moshe was not based on the miracles he performed. Therefore, we do not have to compare the miracles of this "prophet" to the miracles of Moshe. We believe in Moshe with complete, everlasting, and unshakable trust because we heard the Revelation just as he heard it. This is expressed in the verse, "*They will believe in you forever*" (Shemos 19:9).

This makes us and Moshe like two witnesses who testify that they observed an event. Each witness knows with certainty that both his own and his partner's testimony is true. No further proof of their veracity is needed.

The same is true in our case. We, the community of Yisrael, were convinced of the trustworthiness of Moshe Rabbeinu, because we ourselves were there when Hashem spoke at Mount Sinai. When Moshe performed miracles it was only because the situation demanded it, as is evident from the Torah verses. This important

principle has been widely ignored and most people do not rely on it any longer. Therefore, [it should be reiterated that] our belief in Moshe Rabbeinu is far greater than our trust in miracles. Shlomoh had this in mind when he wrote, "*Have you anything to show like the encirclement of the two camps?*" (Shir Hashirim 4:1). In a figurative sense, Yisrael is saying to the nation, "Can you show us anything as magnificent as the Revelation on Sinai?"

Therefore, if a Jewish or even a non-Jewish prophet urges people to follow the Jewish faith without adding or subtracting from it, as Yeshayah, Yirmiyah, and others like them did, we should demand that he perform a miracle. If he does, we believe in him, and recognize him as a prophet. But if he fails, and one of his predictions remains unfulfilled, he must be put to death. We believe him if he gives a sign, even though he might be an impostor. Hashem told us in the Torah that if two witnesses testify in a case, we bring in a verdict on the basis of their testimony. Although we cannot be absolutely sure their testimony is true, we give the witnesses the benefit of the doubt and rely on their reputation of honesty, even though we cannot be absolutely sure whether their testimony is true. So too, the Torah states, if a prophet predicts the future or performs a miracle and his prediction comes true, we accept him, even though we cannot say with certainty that he is a true prophet. At the same time, we are told explicitly the major factor that disqualifies a prophet: if he says anything that contradicts the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu.

The entire subject of prophecy has been thoroughly and extensively discussed in our Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishnah.<sup>4</sup> There you will find a detailed analysis of this important principle that forms the cornerstone of the Torah and is the pillar of our faith. You should realize that not only is it forbidden to add to or subtract from the Torah, but even the Oral Law that was handed down by the Sages from one generation to the next may not be altered.

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<sup>4</sup>See pages 86–98.

# *The Coming of Mashiach— The Messiah*

## **CALCULATIONS OF THE DATE OF REDEMPTION**

Your letter mentions the calculations that *Rabbeinu Saadiah Gaon*<sup>1</sup> made for the date of the coming of Mashiach. You should be aware that no human being will ever be able to determine the exact date [of Mashiach's coming], as Daniel stated, "*For these words are secret and sealed to the time of the end*" (Daniel 12:9). Nevertheless, many theories were suggested by a few scholars who thought that they had discovered the date. This was predicted by Daniel, "*Many will run far and wide and opinions will increase*" (Daniel 12:4). In other words, there will be much speculation about it. Furthermore, Hashem informed us through His prophets that many people will calculate the time of the coming of Mashiach; the date will pass and nothing will happen. We are warned against yielding to doubt and misgivings because of these miscalculations. We are urged not to be disillusioned if these computations do not come to fruition. We are told: The longer the delay, the more intensely you should hope. As it says, "*For there is yet a prophecy for a set term, it declares of the end and does not lie. Even if it tarries wait for it still; for it will surely come, without delay*" (Chavakuk 2:3).

Even the date of the end of the Egyptian exile was not exactly known. This gave rise to various interpretations. Hashem, however, clearly spelled it out, stating, "*They will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years*" (Bereishis 15:13). Some thought that the period of 400 years began when Yaakov arrived in Egypt. Others counted it from the beginning of Yisrael's enslavement, which

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<sup>1</sup>Rabbeinu Saadiah Gaon (892–942 C.E.), one of the foremost personalities in Jewish history. He wrote *Emunos Vedeyos* (in Arabic), a seminal philosophical work.

happened seventy years later. Others figured it from the time of the *Bris Bein Habesarim* (The Covenant of the Halves), when this prophecy was given to Avraham. As our Sages taught us, 400 years after this Covenant, and thirty years before Moshe appeared on the scene, a group of the Children of Yisrael [from the tribe of Ephraim] left Egypt. They thought that the predicted end of the exile had arrived. However, the Egyptians captured and killed them and increased the workload of the Hebrew slaves [who remained in Egypt]. David alluded to these men who miscalculated and left Egypt, in the verse, "*Like the Ephraimite bowmen who turned back in the day of battle*" (Tehillim 78:9).

The end of the Egyptian exile came 400 years after the birth of Yitzchak the heir of Avraham, as it is written, "*It is through Yitzchak that you will gain posterity*" (Bereishis 21:12). About him it was said, "*Your descendants will be foreigners in a land that is not theirs. They will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years*" (Bereishis 15:13). During this exile, they would rule over them, enslave them, and wear them down. The 400 years refer only to exile and not to the years of enslavement. This was misunderstood until the great prophet (Moshe) came. When the Exodus took place exactly 400 years after the birth of Yitzchak, it became clear. Now, if so much uncertainty surrounded the end of the Egyptian exile [the duration of which was known], then surely the end of this long exile is shrouded in obscurity. Its long duration has appalled and dismayed the prophets to the point that one of them exclaimed in utter amazement, "*Will You be angry with us forever, prolong Your wrath for all generations?*" (Tehillim 85:6). Yeshayah, too, alluded to the seeming endlessness of this exile. He stated, "*They shall be gathered in a dungeon as prisoners are gathered; They shall be locked up in a prison. But after many days they shall be released*" (Yeshayah 24:22).

Daniel declared the date of the final redemption a deep secret. Our Sages have discouraged the calculation of the time of the coming of Mashiach. They feared that the masses may be confused and led astray when the predicted time arrives and Mashiach does not come. This led our Sages to say, "*May the people that calculate the final redemption meet with adversity*" (Sanhedrin 97b).

Although making calculations of the time of redemption is forbidden, we must judge Rabbeinu Saadiah Gaon favorably. The Jews of his time were influenced by many distorted ideologies. If not for [Rabbeinu Saadiah's] work of explaining the perplexing

portions of the Torah and strengthening their faltering faith with the power of his word and his pen, they would have abandoned the Torah altogether. He sincerely believed that by means of Messianic calculations he could rally the Jewish public, encourage them, and inspire them with hope. Whatever he did was done for the sake of heaven. Since he had only the purest of motives, we should not fault him for engaging in Messianic calculations.

## THE RAMBAM REJECTS ASTROLOGY

I notice that you have a liking for astrology, and you find meaning in the constellations and conjunctions of planets. You should reject such thoughts and banish such concepts from your minds. Cleanse your mind of these worthless ideas like you wash dirt from your clothes. Accomplished non-Jewish scholars, and certainly Jewish scholars, do not consider astrology a genuine science. Its theories can easily be disproved by rational arguments, but this is not the place to go into them.

Before Moshe rose to prominence, the astrologers had unanimously predicted that the Jewish nation would never be released from slavery or attain its independence. Just when the astrologers thought the Jewish people had reached the bottom of degradation, destiny shone brightly on Yisrael. The most illustrious human being (Moshe) was born among them. Just when the astrologers unanimously foretold that Egypt would enjoy a period of wholesome climate, prosperity, and tranquility, the plagues struck. Speaking of these failed forecasts, Yeshayah says, "*Where indeed are your sages? Let them tell you; let them discover what the God of Hosts has planned against Egypt*" (Yeshayah 19:12).

The same thing happened to the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar. When all the astrologers, scholars, and wise men unanimously agreed that his reign marked the beginning of a long period of supremacy, his empire collapsed and vanished from the scene. This was foretold by Hashem through Yeshayah. [Yeshayah] ridiculed their scholars and wise men who boasted of their wisdom. He mocked the government that took pride in its outstanding scholars. Said Yeshayah, "*You are helpless despite all your art. Let them stand up and help you now, the astrologers, the star-gazers, who announce, month by month, whatever will come upon you* (Yeshayah 47:13).

The same situation will prevail in the days of Mashiach, may he soon come. The gentiles believe that our people will never become an independent nation nor will they ever be released from the subservient condition they are in. All the astrologers and sorcerers will share this opinion. Hashem will give lie to their thoughts and discredit their false views by revealing the Mashiach. Yeshayah said this prophecy

*[It is I] Who annuls the omens of diviners, and makes fools of the augurs; Who turns sages back, and makes nonsense of their knowledge; Who confirms the word of My servant, and fulfills the prediction of My messengers. It is I Who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," and of the towns of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt; and their ruins I will restore." [Yeshayah 44:25,26]*

[Therefore,] do not pay any attention to astrological theories that deal with the conjunction of the stars in the greater or smaller constellations.

## DISPROVES ASTROLOGERS' ALLEGATIONS

You write that science is at a low ebb and research is nonexistent in your country (Yemen). You attribute this to the influence of the constellations in the earthly trigon [of the zodiac].<sup>2</sup> Please understand that this lack of learning is prevalent not only in your country. Disrespect of sages and poor standards of education are widespread throughout Yisrael today. A Divine prophecy predicts this, stating, "*Truly, I shall further baffle that people with bafflement upon bafflement; and the wisdom of its wise shall fail, and the prudence of its prudent shall vanish*" (Yeshayah 29:14). This situation is not due to the earthly or the fiery trigon. This can be proved by the fact that King Shlomoh lived during the earthly trigon. Yet he is described as "*the wisest of all men*"

<sup>2</sup>The zodiac is an imaginary belt encircling the heavens. It is divided into twelve parts, called signs of the zodiac or *mazalos* that correspond to twelve constellations bearing the same name (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, etc., or in Hebrew, *T'leh*, *Shor*, *Te'omim*, *Sartan*, *Aryeh*, *Besulah*, *Moznayim*, *Akrov*, *Keshes*, *G'di*, *D'li*, *Dagim*). The zodiac is also divided into four quarters, called trigons, each consisting of three signs. The four trigons represent earth, water, air, and fire. Astrologers believe that the influence of the earthly trigon causes a decrease in the pursuit of knowledge.

(Melachim I 8:11). In the same way our Father, Avraham, who is called the Pillar of the World, discovered the First Cause of all Creation. He taught it to all the scholars, and proclaimed the fundamental principle of the Unity of God to all mankind. Furthermore, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov carried the Throne of Glory in their hearts: they attained a true understanding of the Essence of the *Shechinah* (glory of Hashem). The Sages said, "The Patriarchs are the chariots [of the Shechinah]", which the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 82:7) derives from the verse, "*Hashem rose up from upon him*" (*Bereishis* 35:13). Yet the three Patriarchs lived during the earthly trigon.

Let me explain. There is a small conjunction<sup>3</sup> in which Saturn and Jupiter come together. This happens once in about twenty solar years. This conjunction repeats itself twelve times in each trigon so that they conjunct in each trigon for 240 years. Then they move into the next trigon in what is called the medium conjunction. According to this calculation, an interval of 960 years will elapse between the first and second conjunction of two planets in the same point of the zodiac. This is called the great conjunction. It extends for 960 years, from the first until the second meeting of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation Aries. By counting back, you will understand all that I have said about Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, as well as David and Shlomoh living during the earthly trigon. My aim in explaining all this is to convince you to dismiss any thought you might have that the trigon can influence human affairs.

You also wrote that some people calculated that at some future point all seven planets will come together in one of the constellations of the zodiac. This just is not true. There will never be a meeting of the seven planets, neither in the next conjunction nor in any future ones. This calculation was made by an ignorant person, which is evident from another statement of his, that you quote, to the effect that there will be a flood of air and dust.

You must recognize that these and similar statements are nothing but lies and deceptions. Do not believe such things just because they are in a book; the liar shrinks no more from deceiving with his pen than he does with his mouth. Fools and the uneducated will take a written statement at face value. But one must demand proof before he can believe a theory.

<sup>3</sup>In astronomy, conjunction means the position of two planets when they are in the same longitude.

A blind person relies on a sighted man for direction and follows his guidance. A sick person will follow his doctor's orders and advice. It is essential for people at large to place their trust in the prophets who were men of true insight and rely on them when they are taught the truth or falsehood of a given teaching. In the absence of prophets [people should look for guidance] from the Sages who study and analyze wisdom and doctrines day and night, and can distinguish between the truth and that which is false.

I want to impress on you that anything you heard or read on the subject of astrology and related fields is untrue. The author of such statements is either a fool, a clown, or one who tries to destroy the Torah and tear down its protective walls. Don't you recognize the audacity of these individuals who say that there will be a flood of air and dust? They might as well say, there will be a deluge of fire. Their prediction is meant to mislead and seduce people into believing that the deluge in the time of Noach was caused merely by a convergence of water. They claim that it was not sent as a punishment by the True Judge for the many sins of the world's population, contrary to the teachings of the Torah. If you follow their reasoning, Sodom and the other cities were not destroyed because of their lack of belief and the wickedness of their inhabitants. This is a direct denial of the Torah, which says, "*I will go down and see, if they have acted according to the outcry that has reached Me; I will destroy them*" (Bereishis 18:21). Whatever happens in the world by the Hand of Hashem, they say is the outcome of the conjunctions of the planets.

They advance these theories because they want to undermine the principles of our faith and unleash their animal lusts and cravings, like beasts and ostriches. Hashem warned us in the Torah against this view. He said that, "If you make Me angry you will be struck with disaster because of your transgressions. But if you attribute these disasters to chance rather than to your sinful conduct, then I will increase your calamities more and more." This is spelled out in the Chapter of Reproof, where it says, "*If you are keri to Me . . . then I will be-keri to you with a vengeance*" (Vayikra 26:27, 28). The word *keri* means "something that is unplanned, that happens by chance; by accident." Thus the meaning of the verse is: "If you treat My acts as an accident . . . then I will increase this kind of 'accident' with a vengeance, bringing yet another sevenfold increase in your punishment for your sins."

The above remarks make it abundantly clear that the coming of Mashiach is in no way influenced by the orbits of the stars.

It should be noted that one of the brilliant scholars in Andalusia, Spain, wrote a book, in which he calculated by means of astrology, the date of the final redemption and predicted the coming of Mashiach in a certain year. Every one of our pious scholars sneered at his words, belittled his scheme, and ostracized him for what he had done in foretelling the future. But reality dealt him a more severe blow than we could have. At the very time Mashiach was supposed to make his appearance [by his reckoning], a rebel leader rose up in the Maghreb who issued an order for everyone to convert. The rebel takeover ruined the reputation of the practitioners of astrology. The hardships our people suffered in the Exile caused them to turn to pseudo-sciences that do not have a shred of evidence to back them up.

## WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Now, dear brothers, "*be strong and of good courage, all you who wait for Hashem*" (Tehillim 31:25). Strengthen one another. Implant in everyone's heart the faith in the coming of the Redeemer, may he soon appear. "*Strengthen the hands that are slack and make firm tottering knees*" (Yeshayah 35:3). Remember, Hashem has let us know through Yeshayah, the herald of Yisrael, that the prolonged affliction of the exile will lead many people to believe that He has abandoned us and turned away from us—God forbid. In light of that, He assured us that He will never abandon us or forget us. As it says, "*Zion says, 'Hashem has forsaken me, Hashem has forgotten me.'*" The prophecy continues, "*Can a woman forget her baby, or disown the child of her womb? Though she might forget, I never could forget you*" (Yeshayah 49:14,15). Hashem has already related a similar message through the first prophet (Moshe), stating, "*For Hashem your God is a compassionate God. He will not fail you nor will He let you perish; He will not forget the covenant with the fathers which He swore to them*" (Devarim 4:31). Also, "*Hashem will bring back your remnants and have mercy on you. Hashem your God will once again gather you from among all the nations where He scattered you*" (Devarim 30:3).

Dear brothers, it is one of the cornerstones of the Jewish faith that a Redeemer will arise who is a descendant of Shlomoh. He will

gather in our scattered ones, take away our humiliation, publicize the true religion, and wipe out those who flout His commands. Hashem promised this in the Torah. "*I see it, but not now; I perceive it, but not in the near future. A star<sup>4</sup> shall go forth from Yaakov, and a staff shall arise in Yisrael, crushing all of Moab's princes, and dominating all of Shes's descendants. Edom shall be demolished, and his enemy Seir destroyed, but Yisrael shall be triumphant*" (Bamidbar 24:17,18). The time of his arrival will be a period of great calamity for the Jewish people. As it is written, "*He will have seen that their power is gone, and none is left to set free or take captive*" (Devarim 32:36). Only then Hashem will identify Mashiach, and He will fulfill the promises He made. The prophet, horrified by the vision of the time the Redeemer will appear, exclaimed, "*Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can hold out when he appears?*" (Malachi 3:2). This is the correct view that you must believe about this subject.

We know from the prophecies of Daniel and Yeshayah, and from the words of our Sages, that Mashiach will come after the Roman and Arab empires have swept across the world. This is the case today. No one can doubt this or deny it. Only after Daniel spoke of the Arab empire and the rise of Mohammed, did he speak of the coming of Mashiach, which will take place afterward. Yeshayah, too, declared in his vision that the arrival of Mashiach is linked to the appearance of the Madman [Mohammed]. He says, "*He will see mounted men, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, and he will listen closely, most attentively*" (Yeshayah 21:7). Now the rider on the donkey is Mashiach, who is described as "*humble, riding on a donkey*" (Zechariah 9:9). He will come soon after the rise of the man riding a camel. That is, the Arab empire. The phrase "horsemen in pairs" refers to the bond between the two empires Edom and Yishmael. The same interpretation applies to Daniel's dream of the statue and the beasts.<sup>5</sup> You can plainly see this by simply reading the verses.

## THE RAMBAM'S AMAZING FAMILY TRADITION

The exact date of the coming of Mashiach cannot be known. But I have in my possession a great and amazing tradition that I received

<sup>4</sup>This is a messianic prophecy.

<sup>5</sup>The Rambam is referring to Daniel, chapters 2 and 7.

from my father. He received it from his father and his grandfather, going back to our ancestors who went into exile at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. As it says, "*and the exiles of Jerusalem that are in Spain*" (*Ovadiah 1:20*).

This tradition is that Bilam's sayings contain a hint of the future restoration of prophecy in Yisrael. There are many instances where a verse in the Torah, in addition to its simple meaning, also contains an allusion to something else. For example, we find that Yaakov, speaking to his sons, said, "R'du – Go down there [to Egypt]" (*Bereishis 42:2*). R'du has the numeric value of 210, which is an allusion to the 210 years the children of Yisrael would be exiled in Egypt. So too, *venoshantem*, in the verse, "*When you have children and grandchildren, venoshantem – and have been established for a long time in the land*" (*Devarim 4:25*), foretells in a hidden way how long the Jewish people would live in Eretz Yisrael. From the time they entered the land until the exile in the days of King Yehoyakim is a total of 840 years. This is the numeric value of *venoshantem*. Many similar examples can be cited.

The family tradition that I received is based on this system of scriptural interpretation [by means of *remez* – hidden allusion]. The tradition is based on Bilam's oracle, "*Ka'eis – at this point in time – it is said of Yaakov and of Yisrael: 'What God is doing'*" (*Bamidbar 23:23*). This contains a concealed allusion regarding the restoration of prophecy in Yisrael. [Based on another translation of *ka'eis*, which means "equal to the time"] the verse means that after the passage of a period equal to the time that elapsed since the six days of Creation, prophecy would be restored in Yisrael. Prophets will once again foretell "*what God is doing*." Bilam made this prediction in the fortieth year after the Exodus, which was the year 2488 of Creation. According to this equation, prophecy will be restored in Yisrael in the year 4976<sup>6</sup> of Creation. It is true beyond doubt that the restoration of prophecy is the first phase of the coming of Mashiach. As it is stated, "*After that I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy*" (*Yoel 3:1*).

This is the most dependable of all the calculations that have been made about the coming of Mashiach. Although I have spoken

<sup>6</sup>Two times 2488 equals 4976. The year 4976 of Creation corresponds with 1216 C.E. It should be remembered that the Rambam wrote the Letter to Yemen in 1172.

out against making such calculations and strongly opposed the publicizing of the date of his arrival, I have done this in order to keep people from [falling into despair], thinking that his coming is in the distant future. I have mentioned this to you earlier. Blessed is Hashem Who knows [the truth].

You mention in your letter that ours is the time [of the coming of Mashiach] about which Yirmiyah prophesied, "*It is a time of trouble for Yaakov, but he shall be delivered from it*" (Yirmiyah 30:7). This is not correct. This verse definitely refers to the wars of Gog and Magog, which will take place some time after the appearance of Mashiach.

The various signs you mention are very flimsy. They are not attributed to our Sages and were not given by them. Some of them are proverbs and allegories that have nothing to do with this subject.

# *The False Mashiach*

You write about a certain man who makes the rounds of the cities of Yemen, claiming to be Mashiach. Let me assure you that I am not surprised at him. Without a doubt, the man is insane. You cannot blame a sick person for an illness that is not his own doing. Neither am I shocked at the masses who believe in him. They were captivated by him due to their broken spirit and their ignorance of both the illustrious character of Mashiach and the place where he will appear. However, I am astonished that you, a Torah scholar who is well-versed in the Talmud and its commentaries, came under his spell. Don't you know, dear brother, that Mashiach is a prophet of the highest order who ranks higher than any other prophet with the exception of Moshe Rabbeinu? Don't you know that a person who falsely pretends to be a prophet must be put to death for having assumed this great title, just as a person who prophesied in the name of idols must be executed? The Torah states, "*If a prophet presumptuously makes a declaration in My name when I have not commanded him to do so, or if he speaks in the name of other gods, then that prophet shall die*" (Devarim 18:20). What stronger proof is there that he is a liar than his laying claim to the title of Mashiach?

I am really puzzled by your remark about this man; that he is known to be a serene person who has some wisdom. Do you really think these qualities make him Mashiach? You were convinced by him because you have not given any thought to the grandeur of Mashiach, nor to how and where he would appear, and by what specific sign he can be identified. Mashiach will be more sublime and more revered than any other prophet, except Moshe Rabbeinu. The marks of distinction Hashem has given him are even greater than those of Moshe Rabbeinu. Mashiach is described in the following terms: "*His delight shall be in the fear of God; he shall not judge by what his eyes behold, nor decide by what his ears perceive*" (Yeshayah 11:3), and "*The spirit of God shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and valor, a spirit of devotion and reverence for God*" (Yeshayah 11:2). "*Justice shall be the girdle of his loins and faithfulness*

*the girdle of his waist*" (Yeshayah 11:5). Hashem called him six special names in this verse: "*For a child has been born to us, a son has been given us, and authority has settled on his shoulders. He has been named Wondrous One, Adviser, Great, Strong, Eternal Father, Peaceable Ruler*" (Yeshayah 9:5). The name Great is meant as a superlative: to tell you that he is superior to any human being.

We know that one of the basic conditions for a prophet is that he possess limitless knowledge and wisdom. Only to such an individual will Hashem grant the power of prophecy. It is a fundamental belief that prophecy is granted only to a man who is wise, strong, and wealthy. The Sages explain that strong means the ability to subdue one's cravings. Wealthy means rich in knowledge. If we do not believe a man's claim to prophecy unless he is a scholar of eminent stature, then surely we must not believe an ignoramus who claims that he is Mashiach. This person is an illiterate knowing nothing. This is apparent from the command he issued to the people to donate all their money to the poor. Whoever obeyed him is a fool, for this man acted against the laws of the Torah. According to the Torah, one should give away only part of his money to charity, not all of it. It says, "*But of all that anyone owns, be it man or beast or land of his holding, nothing that he has consecrated for Hashem may be sold or redeemed*" (Vayikra 27:28). The Sages of the Talmud interpret the phrase "*of all that anyone owns*" to mean, "*part of what he owns, but not all that he owns*." Based on this passage, they placed a limit on how much you should give to charity. They stated, "*Whoever wants to be liberal should not give away more than one fifth of his possessions*" (Kesuvos 50a). No doubt, the same insanity that motivated this man to claim that he is Mashiach prompted him to order his followers to give all their possessions to the needy. As a result, the rich will become poor and the poor will become rich. By his law, the newly rich then would have to return the money they received to the newly needy. The money would then move around in a vicious cycle, which is the height of stupidity.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRUE MASHIACH

Regarding the question of how and where Mashiach will appear; we know he will make his first appearance in Eretz Yisrael. As it says, "*Suddenly he will come to His temple*" (Malachi 3:1). But no one will

know how he will arise until it actually happens. Mashiach will not be a known person that can be identified beforehand as the son of so-and-so of such-and-such family. The signs and wonders he will perform will be proof that he is the true Mashiach. We are told by Hashem regarding Mashiach's person, "*Behold, a man called Tzemach (Sprout) shall sprout forth from the place where he is*" (Zechariah 6:12). Similarly, Yeshayah said that he will arrive without anyone knowing anything about either his father, mother, or family: "*For he shot up like a sapling, like a root out of dry ground*" (Yeshayah 53:2).

After making his appearance in Eretz Yisrael and gathering the entire Jewish people in Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside, the news will spread to the East and the West until it reaches Yemen and the Jews beyond in India. This has been prophesied by Yeshayah, "*Go, swift messengers to a nation tall and of glossy skin, to a people awesome from their beginning onward; a nation that is sturdy and treads down, whose land rivers divide . . . To the place where the name of Hashem of Hosts abides, to Mount Zion*" (Yeshayah 18:2, 7).

The qualities of Mashiach are described by all the prophets from Moshe to Malachi. You can gather this information from the twenty-four books of *Tanach*. His most outstanding characteristic is that the news of his coming will appall and terrify all the kings of the world. Their kingdoms will collapse. Their attempts to defy him by military force or otherwise will utterly fail. Overwhelmed by the miracles they are witnessing, they will stare open-mouthed at the wonders he performs. Yeshayah portrays the subservience of the kings to Mashiach in the verse, "*Kings will be silenced because of him, for they will see what has not been told them, will behold what they never have heard*" (Yeshayah 52:15). He will kill whomever he wants by word of his mouth. No one can escape or be saved, as it says, "*He will strike down a land with the rod of his mouth, and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips*" (Yeshayah 11:4). Worldwide upheavals and wars, ranging from East to West will not come to an end at the beginning of the reign of Mashiach, but only after the wars of Gog and Magog. This was foretold by Yechezkel (Yechezkel 38, 39).

## THE FALSE MASHIACH IS INSANE

I do not believe that the man who has appeared in your country has any of these qualifications. The Christians falsely attribute great

miracles to *oso ha'ish* – “that man” [the founder of their religion], such as reviving the dead. Even if we conceded this for the sake of argument, we could not accept their argument that Jeshu is Mashiach. We can show them a thousand proofs in *Tanach* that he is not, even from their point of view. Indeed, would anyone lay claim to this title unless he wanted to make himself a laughingstock?

To summarize, if this man had made his claim willfully and scornfully, he would deserve to die a thousand times. I tend to believe that he became mentally unbalanced and lost his mind. Let me offer you advice that will benefit both you and him: Lock him up until the gentiles find out about it, and pass the word around that he is crazy. Afterwards you can release him, and he will be safe. For if the gentiles hear that you locked him up because he claims to be Mashiach, they will realize that you believe him insane, and you will escape the anger of the gentiles. But if you delay until the gentiles find out about it by themselves, they will believe that he is trying to rebel. They will kill him, and you might provoke their anger against your community, God forbid.

## SUBMIT TO OPPRESSION

Dear brothers, because of our many sins Hashem has cast us among this nation, the Arabs, who are treating us badly. They pass laws designed to cause us distress and make us despised. The Torah foretold: “*Our enemies will judge us*” (*Devarim 32:31*). Never has there been a nation that hated, humiliated, and loathed us as much as this one. So bad is our lot that when David had a divinely inspired vision of the troubles that would happen to Yisrael, he bemoaned and lamented the suffering of the Jewish nation at the hands of the Arabs. He prayed on their behalf, saying, “*Woe is me, that I live with Meshech, that I dwell among the clans of Kedar*” (*Tehillim 120:5*). Note how the verse sets apart Kedar from the other children of Yishmael. This is done because as everyone knows, the Madman is a descendant of the people of Kedar. Daniel, too, when speaking of our degradation and poverty associated with the Arab empire, may it soon be defeated, said, “*It hurled some stars of the [heavenly] host to the ground and trampled them*” (*Daniel 8:10*). We suffered unbearable oppression and had to endure their lies and defamations. Yet, we acted like David as he describes himself in the verse, “*But I am like a*

*deaf man, who does not hear, like a dumb man who does not open his mouth*" (Tehillim 38:14). We followed the admonition of our Sages who told us to bear the deceit and the falsehood of Yishmael in silence. They found an allusion for this attitude in the names of Yishmael's sons, "Mishma, Dumah and Massa" (Bereishis 25:14). They homiletically interpreted these names to mean, "Listen (*sh'ma*), be silent (*dom*) and endure (*massa*)."<sup>1</sup> All of us, both old and young, agreed to put up with their tyranny. As Yeshayah told us, "*I offered my back to the floggers, and my cheeks to those who tore out my hair; I did not hide my face from insult and spittle*" (Yeshayah 50:6). In spite of that, we cannot escape their constant abuse and harassment. Much as we try to appease them, they continue to persecute and molest us. As David said, "*I am all peace, but when I speak, they are for war*" (Tehillim 120:7). Surely, if we stir up trouble and challenge the government with unfounded allegations, we endanger ourselves and risk our lives.

## OTHER IMPOSTORS

I want to tell you that when the Moslem empire began to rise,<sup>2</sup> a man appeared on the other side of the river who pretended to be Mashiach. As proof, he performed a "miracle" by going to sleep afflicted with leprosy and waking up healthy. He inspired an exodus of tens of thousands of Jews. But his mission ended in failure and his plans collapsed. His followers returned to Isfahan<sup>3</sup> and the Jews of Isfahan suffered troubles because of him.

A similar incident occurred forty-eight years ago in the Maghreb, in the city of Fez.<sup>4</sup> A person declared himself the herald and messenger of Mashiach. He announced that Mashiach himself would arrive that very year. His prediction did not materialize, and the result was renewed persecutions of the Jews. I heard this from a person who was there and witnessed the entire episode.

About ten years before this incident,<sup>4</sup> a man in Cordova, Spain claimed to be Mashiach. This brought that Jewish community to the brink of destruction.

<sup>1</sup> The religion of Islam was established in 622 C.E.

<sup>2</sup> Isfahan is a city in west central Iran, former capital of Persia.

<sup>3</sup> Fez is a city in north east Morocco. This incident happened in 1127, forty-five years before the Rambam wrote the Iggeres Teiman in 1172.

<sup>4</sup> In 1117.

Thirty years before his emergence,<sup>5</sup> a man in France pretended to be Mashiach and performed so-called miracles. But the French killed him, and along with him they slew many in the Jewish community.

[The text of the above accounts of the emergence and fall of various impostors is found in the standard translations of the Iggeres Teiman from the Arabic by R. Shmuel ibn Tibbon, R. Nachum Maghrabi, and R. Avraham Halevi ben Chasdai of Barcelona. The Rambam's original Arabic text is said to contain a much more detailed version of these reports. This original, full Arabic text was translated into Hebrew by Dr. Jacob Mann in 1928.]

I will now briefly tell you the events that happened at the beginning of the rise of the Arab empire, which will be helpful to you. In one of these episodes, tens of thousands of Jews marched from the East beyond Isfahan, led by a man who pretended to be Mashiach.<sup>6</sup> They were carrying weapons and drawn swords. They killed everyone who tried to stop them. They ultimately reached the vicinity of Baghdad. This happened in the beginning of the reign of the Omayyad dynasty.<sup>7</sup>

The Sultan then said to the Jews of his kingdom, "Let your rabbis go out to this crowd and determine whether he is indeed the one you are anticipating (Mashiach). If so, we will make a peace treaty with you and abide by any conditions you may set. But if it is untrue, I will kill them." When the rabbis met these Jews, they were told, "We come from the other side of the river." Then the rabbis asked them, "Who incited you to make this revolution?" They replied, "This man here, a descendant of David, whom we know to be a pious and upright man. We found out that he went to sleep a leper and arose the next morning cured and healthy." They thought this was one of the characteristics of Mashiach that is alluded to in the verse, "*plagued, smitten and afflicted by Hashem*" (Yeshayah 53:4). The rabbis explained to them that this interpretation was wrong, and that he lacked many, if not all, of the qualities of Mashiach. The rabbis told them, "Brothers, since you are still close to your home-

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<sup>5</sup> In 1087.

<sup>6</sup> The Rambam is referring to the false Mashiach Abu Isi Ovadiah from Isfahan, Persia who lived during the reign of Caliph Abd al Malach (659–705).

<sup>7</sup> The Omayyad dynasty ruled the Islamic empire from 661 to 750. They spread Islam over a large region.

land, you can go back. If you stay here, you will perish. You will also invalidate the words of Moshe by misleading the people into thinking that Mashiach has appeared and has been vanquished. The truth is that there is no prophet among you, nor do you have a sign to substantiate your leader's claims." In the end, the Jews were convinced by the rabbis. The Sultan gave them a gift of thousands of dinars to induce them to return home. But after they had returned home, he imposed a fine on them to recover the vast amount of money he had given to them. He began to harass them. He ordered them to mark their clothing with the word "cursed," and to attach an iron bar to their backs and one to their chests. Ever since, the communities of Khorasan and Isfahan suffered the trials of the harsh exile. Report of this incident came to me by word of mouth.

The following episode I researched. I can vouch for its authenticity, because it happened not long ago. About fifty years ago,<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Moshe Dar'i, a pious and upright man, an outstanding Torah scholar came from Dara<sup>9</sup> to Andalusia to study under Rabbi Yosef Halevi Ibn Migash<sup>10</sup> of whom you surely have heard. Later he left for Fez, in the center of the Maghreb. People flocked to him because of his piety, his virtue and his learning. He told them that Mashiach had come, and that Hashem had revealed this to him in a dream. He did not pretend to be Mashiach, as this lunatic did, he only declared that Mashiach had already appeared. Many people became his followers and believed him implicitly. My father and master admonished the people not to follow him, and ordered them to leave him. Only a few obeyed my father. Most, or to be exact, almost all of them, remained faithful to Rabbi Moshe. Finally, he foretold things that actually came true. He would say to the crowd, "Tomorrow such will happen," and it did happen precisely as he predicted. Once he predicted a heavy rain for the coming week, and that the raindrops would be blood. This was thought to be a sign of the coming of Mashiach, as indicated in the verse, "*I will set portents in the sky and on earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke*" (Yoel 3:3). This took place in the month of Marcheshvan. A very heavy rain did

<sup>8</sup> In 1122, fifty years before the Rambam wrote Iggeres Teiman in 1172.

<sup>9</sup> Dara is a town in Morocco.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Yosef Halevi ibn Migash, known as Ri Migash (1077-1141). He studied under the Rif (Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi) and became his successor. As rosh yeshivah of Lucena, Spain, Rabbi Yosef taught Rabbi Maimon, father of the Rambam.

indeed fall during that week. The raindrops were reddish and muddy, as if mixed with clay. This miracle proved to everyone that he was undoubtedly a prophet. This occurrence is not inconsistent with the doctrine of the Torah. Prophecy, as I explained, will return to Yisrael before the coming of Mashiach.

After the majority of the people had faith in him, he foretold that Mashiach would come that same year, on the night of Pesach. He advised the people to sell their property and buy things on credit from the Moslems, paying ten dinars for something that is worth one. This they did. Pesach came and nothing happened. The people were impoverished, since most of them had sold their possessions very cheaply, and were heavily burdened by debt. The gentiles and their slaves would have killed him [Rabbi Moshe Dar'i] were they able to find him. Since this Moslem country no longer offered him shelter, he left for Eretz Yisrael where he died, may his memory be blessed.<sup>11</sup> I was told by eyewitnesses that when he left [the Maghreb] he predicted both important and trivial things that actually happened later to the Jews of the Maghreb.

My father told me that about fifteen or twenty years before this incident,<sup>12</sup> some respectable people in Cordova,<sup>13</sup> the capital of Andalusia, who believed in astrology came to the conclusion that Mashiach would arrive that year. They sought a revelation in a dream, night after night, in order to find out whether Mashiach would be a native of their region. In the end, they chose a pious and virtuous person named Ibn Aryeh who had been teaching the people. He performed miracles and foretold the future, just as Al Dari did, until he won over the hearts of the people. When the elders and the rabbis of our community heard this, they assembled in the synagogue and had Ibn Aryeh brought there. They flogged him and imposed a fine on him. They also put him under a ban because he stood idly by and permitted people to use his name. He should have restrained them and reprimanded them for transgress-

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Moshe Dar'i was held in high regard when he moved to Eretz Yisrael after this incident. The Rambam mentions him respectfully in one of his responsa (Kovetz, Volume 1:26).

<sup>12</sup> Sometime between 1102 and 1107.

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Maimon, the Rambam's father lived in Cordova with his family. When the Rambam was 13 years old, the city fell to the fanatical Almohad Moslem sect. The family wandered from place to place for almost twelve years, and finally settled in Cairo, Egypt.

ing Torah law. They did the same thing to his followers. It was only with great difficulty that the Jews were saved from the gentiles.

About forty years before the incident of Ibn Aryeh in Andalusia, a man of Linon,<sup>14</sup> a large city in France with a Jewish population numbering tens of thousands of families, proclaimed himself Mashiach. On a clear night, he went out into the field, climbed to the top of a high tree, and skipped and jumped from tree to tree as though he were sailing through the sky. He claimed that, according to Daniel, this feat proved that he was Mashiach, as it says, "*One like a human being came with the clouds of heaven, and he was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom*" (Daniel 7:13, 14).

The large crowd which witnessed the miracle became his devoted followers. When the French found out about it they pillaged the city and slew the impostor together with many of his followers. Some of his adherents believe, however, that he is hiding somewhere until this very day.

[End of translation of the detailed account that is omitted in the standard translations, but appears in the original Arabic text.]

## CONCLUSION

These incidents<sup>15</sup> were predicted by our prophets. They informed us, as I have told you, that when the time of the coming of the true Mashiach approaches, the number of people who pretend to be Mashiach will increase. Their claims will not be substantiated nor will they be borne out. They will perish and so will many of their followers. Shlomoh was inspired by *ruach hakodesh* (Divine spirit). He foresaw that the long duration of the exile would induce some of our people to take action to end it before the time of redemption comes. As a result, they would perish or meet with disaster. He, therefore, admonished the Jewish people against taking matters into their own hands. He put them under oath, stating, in a figurative sense, "*I adjure you, O maidens of Yerushalayim, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field: Do not wake or rouse love until it is desired!*" (Shir Hashirim 3:5). Now, dear brothers and friends, accept this oath upon yourselves and do not arouse love until it is desired.

<sup>14</sup> Presumably this is Lyons, France.

<sup>15</sup> Of false messiahs arising in various places at various times.

May Hashem Who created the world with the attribute of Mercy remember us and gather us when He gathers in the dispersed of His exile to the Land of His Inheritance. Then may we behold the sweetness of Hashem and contemplate in His Sanctuary. May He take us out from the Valley of the Shadow of Death into which He has placed us. May He remove darkness from our eyes and gloom from our hearts. May He fulfill in our days and in your days the prophecy, "*The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light, on those who dwelt in a land of gloom, light has dawned*" (Yeshayah 9:1). May He in His fury spread darkness on all our oppressors. May He illuminate our pitch-blackness, as He promised us, "*Behold! Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick clouds the nations; but upon you Hashem will shine, and His Glory be seen over you*" (Yeshayah 60:2).

# *Epilogue*

Greetings to you, my dear friend, master of the sciences, storehouse of wisdom,<sup>1</sup> to all our learned colleagues, and to all the people of the country (Yemen). May there be peace as the light that shines; an abundance of peace until the moon is no more. Amen.

I request that you send a copy of this letter to every community, to its rabbis and members, to strengthen their faith and make them stand staunch and steadfast. Read it privately and at public gatherings. Thereby, you will lead the many to righteousness. Be extremely careful and cautious lest its contents fall into the hands of an evil person who would publicize them to the Moslems. This would bring misfortune in its wake, may Hashem in His mercy spare us from it. When I was writing the letter, I was very afraid of that. However, I realized that the mitzvah of leading the many to righteousness is something that one should not fear. In addition, I am sending this letter as a, "*secret of Hashem to those who fear Him*"<sup>2</sup> (Tehillim 25:14). Besides, the Sages gave us an assurance, which they in turn received from the prophets "persons engaged in doing a mitzvah will not suffer harm" (*Pesachim* 8a). Certainly, there is no mitzvah that is more important than this.

Peace upon all Yisrael. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>This is Rabbi Yaakov al-Fayumi, who was a learned rosh yeshivah in Yemen. The final paragraphs were written in Hebrew by the Rambam.

<sup>2</sup>In other words, since you are a God-fearing man you will guard the letter and treat it discreetly.